

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER
GENERAL ROBERT LIVINGSTON, COMMANDER, 218TH ENHANCED
SEPARATE BRIGADE, SOUTH CAROLINA NATIONAL GUARD, IN COMMAND
OF THE TASK FORCE PHOENIX MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN (VIA
TELECONFERENCE)

MODERATOR: JACK HOLT

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GEN. LIVINGSTON: This is Bob Livingston.

MR. HOLT: General Livingston, Jack Holt with the Bloggers Roundtable.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Yes.

MR. HOLT: And welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable this morning, sir. Glad to have you with us.

On the line with us this morning we've got Andrew Lubin with ON Point and David Axe with DANGER ROOM. We've got Michael Goldfarb with the Weekly Standard and Grim with Blackfive.

As we get this thing started, glad you're with us, and do you have an opening statement, sir?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Yes, I do. And I guess what I'd like to do is to familiarize y'all with the operation that we call Task Force Phoenix, which is a force development operation that reports to the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. The Combined Security Transition Command, which we call CSTC-A, has responsibility for the program management of the mentoring and equipping the Afghan national security forces, which include the police and the army, and also mentoring at the ministerial level.

The mentoring at the two-star level and below and the -- which is the corps level and the region level for the police, falls on Task Force Phoenix, along with our coalition partners. And we've been mentoring the army for the last four and a half years and have a very successful record with them. And the army in fact is in many cases are -- is to the point that they can lead missions at the corps level. And we have since picked up the police mentoring mission in the late 2006 -- November/December time frame 2006. And we're in the process of doing the same type of operation with the police that we did with the army. And we've had some very encouraging results early on with the police.

I think what we see throughout Afghanistan is that the people are tired of fighting. They are tired of the insurgency and the rule of the Taliban, and that the central government has figured out that the key to the -- to doing away with the insurgency is getting the police where they can occupy ground and they can take care of the citizens of Afghanistan.

So that is where we're focusing our efforts, along with the army. And I will tell you initial results with the police are very, very encouraging. The army is well on its way and in many cases has primacy.

So that's kind of the opening statement. That's what Task Force Phoenix is all about. And I'd be happy to answer any questions or discuss anything.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir. Brigadier General Robert Livingston with us this morning.

Now, David Axe, you've just spent time in Afghanistan. Why don't you get us going here?

Q Absolutely. Great.

General, thanks for taking the time. Really appreciate it.

So before I ask my actual question, I need some orientation here. How is your organization -- how does it work with ISAF? What's the relationship there?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: We have embedded training teams with both the Afghan army and the Afghan police. ISAF also supplies Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams, or O-M-L-Ts, OMLTs, which are the equivalent of our embedded training teams. Those training teams work with Task Force Phoenix from a training standpoint to make sure that we are training one army and that we're training one police force. And the majority of the mentoring is still ETT or U.S.-based. But we do have quite a few international partners that come in to help with the mentoring.

We are not an operational headquarters, though. So when the ISAF wants to use an Afghan element, they partner with that element, and our embedded training teams go with them to make sure that they can provide in extremis support, such as medevac and airpower and some other NATO-type operating systems. So the ISAF, through their regional commanders, utilize the force that we help generate.

Q Okay. All right. Great. Thanks.

So I was in Oruzgan province last week, where some of that -- the fighting flared up, especially in Tarin Kot and Chora. And the -- it seems that the brunt of the fighting was borne not by coalition forces or even by Afghan police but by the militia men who had been inducted into the auxiliary police training system but hadn't completed their training and were in the middle of their eight-week course, actually had to write excuses -- excuse notes in saying, "Please excuse me so I can go fight the Taliban."

So it seems like, in some of these outlying provinces especially, that the security apparatuses that are fighting the Taliban are completely unofficial.

So what is Task Force Phoenix -- how does it feel about that? And what is it doing to react to that or to remedy that?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Well, this is -- and that's a very good question, and it strikes to the heart of why we have instituted the Task Force Phoenix and the associated international OMLTs, why we are now involved in mentoring and training the police. Originally the emphasis was placed on the army, because it was felt like the army could help protect the borders of Afghanistan. And the war was at such an intensity that we needed a standing army that was well-respected, a professional, ethical army, so that's where the training started. The police were trained, but they were trained in a central facility and then returned to their homes, and not in sufficient quantity to be able to carry on the counterinsurgency fight that we're fighting now.

So the emphasis has shifted to the police because of the very issue that you're addressing, that we do have some police districts that are not adequately equipped and not adequately trained. And over the next course of several months, they will be better equipped. And the U.S. Congress has just approved a very large equipment budget for Afghanistan for both the army and the police. So they will be receiving the appropriate equipment and they will be receiving the appropriate training.

The Afghan auxiliary police that you referred to is kind of a stopgap method to get at least some rudimentary training, as opposed to no training at all, for some of these outlying districts, so that they can at least defend themselves. And in the instance you're talking about, they actually did a pretty good job doing that. But the -- and there will be further training down the road to go ahead and convert them into actual, normal, uniformed police.

So the system is in place to correct the very concern that you're addressing, and that should be done in a fairly short amount of time. In fact, it is in a matter of less than a year to get to a point that we're comfortable with the police that are currently out there.

Q Can I tack on one quick follow up?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Sure.

Q What about pay? How about pay? Are they going to be -- they're not paid enough right now. Is there a plan to increase their pay?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Yes, there is a plan to increase their pay, and there's also a plan to pay the -- their leadership significantly more than they're currently being paid. There is a problem with pay in the Afghan national police. But that problem is recognized by the ministry of the interior, and they're taking steps to get that corrected. And they are being helped by CSTC-A.

Q Okay, thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Mike Goldfarb, Weekly Standard.

Q Yeah, I mean, I'd just like to follow up a little bit.

From what I've been reading, it seems like there is a lot of problems with coordination between ISAF and OEF, and if you could speak at all to sort of how you coordinate between the two of them or what your role is in that.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: The role that we play is that we have the mentors, and this is a fairly recent development. We have coordination centers at the national level, at the

regional level. And again, there are five regions throughout the country -- central, east, south, west and north -- which corresponds to the police regions and corresponds to the corps of the army. So we have a regional coordination center, and we have provincial coordination centers, and these have just been put into existence for the last three or four months.

The regional coordination center is especially critical, because anybody that's conducting an operation in that area now has representation within that coordination center, and it allows the regional commander view over all the operations in his area so that he can make sure that they're properly coordinated along with the police for low-intensity operations and the Afghan Army. That then provides visibility backup to the national coordination center so that the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior are able to see the operations that are going on within these regions and keep President Karzai abreast of it.

That lack of coordination has been a concern and has been vigorously addressed. And where the Task Force Phoenix gets involved is that we are now supplying ministers to that center to make sure that everyone's represented, and if they're not, then we kind of raise the flag to make sure that somebody gets a representation into that coordination center and also that we mentor the police and the army to use that coordination center properly.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay, great. I'm with Blackfive.

Q Good day, sir. I'd like to ask you as a National Guardsman whether you find that the National Guard -- and maybe the Reserve to some degree -- has any advantage in these sorts of training and mentoring missions versus the regular Army, and if you could talk about that for a little while, I'd appreciate your insight.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: I think that certainly everybody brings a lot of skills to the table and it's truly a partnership. Task Force Phoenix is made up of at this point 17 different nations, all the different services and the components of those services. So everybody brings in a unique skill.

I think the National Guard certainly has some unique skills and that we, based on our training programs, are very proficient warfighters, especially with our postmobilization training. But we also bring in the relationship building and the civilian world reality as far as efficiencies and some of the other things that you have to do in the civilian world in order to get many different groups with different objectives going in the same direction, as opposed with most military operations -- you can just order it done and it gets done.

When we get into the mentoring role with the Afghans, we are encouraging them, we are providing examples, we are negotiating with them and trying to convince them to

do certain things as opposed to ordering them to do it. And those civilian skills that we use -- whatever civilian jobs you might be in -- my particular job is I'm in construction, and to bring together the customer, the engineer, the architect, all the different trades -- to get them all going in the same direction requires a tremendous amount of diplomacy as well as a strong -- well, strong leadership.

So I think that the National Guard certainly brings that dimension to this fight that -- but it is still a -- definitely a joint and a combined fight with everybody, so everybody brings those unique skills in here.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And, Andrew, I believe you're back online now?

Q Yes, I am back. Thanks so much. General, this is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. General, could you tell me -- a two-part question, actually, if time. I spent some time with Task Force Phoenix out in the east, out in Towr Kham Base and then up north in Camp Joyce; much of the people coming across are the Pakistanis who are in the Taliban. Why are the APs and not the ANAs doing the fighting? And that's the question --

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Okay. And you're very faint. I heard that you spent some time on the Pakistan border, but I did not get your question: Why are the -- what?

Q Much of the problems in Afghanistan are the Taliban -- are the way the Pakistanis coming -- you know, invading the country. Why are the APs and the ABPs doing the fighting instead of the ANAs?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Well -- and it is a combination fight.

The border police certainly provide a very critical role in controlling the border crossings, and the district police of the districts along the border also provide a very critical role in that they know their community, they do policing as well as paramilitary-type operations, and that, you know, they basically occupy their own village and take care of their people and provide that type of firepower.

So there's that stationary piece that we call the police, that they're doing -- defending their assigned territory as well as doing the civilian police mission that we would normally think of police; whereas the army is a force that is planning operations that will help separate the anti-government forces or the insurgency from the population in cooperation with the police. And the army also is able to respond when the local police are not able to defend themselves. But that stationary force is the police, whereas that mobile force is the army, and the army is not large enough, nor is it structured, to be able to occupy the entire country. That's the purpose of the police. And we don't want the army to occupy the entire country because we don't want this to turn into a military --

completely military operation. We want it to turn into local police taking care of the people of their region or their area and their district.

So it's with the mind of where we want to go versus where we may happen to be right now. That's why the police need to be better trained, and they actually are increasing in their numbers. And they will always be larger than the army because we want to -- we want the police to protect the local areas.

Q Okay.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Does that answer your question?

Q Absolutely. Very nicely. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anybody have any follow up questions?

Q Yeah, sure. This is David.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q General, you said the --

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Hi, David.

Q -- hi -- the -- sort of the police are supposed to be this sort of first line of defense -- (word inaudible) -- this stationary -- I hate to use the word "occupying," but the stationary force. But in the case of Oruzgan province, they were completely outgunned. Is there going to be an effort to make them heavier in terms of equipment?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Right. And again, this goes back to the question that we talked about earlier -- down south. The police are not adequately equipped throughout the country. In some cases they are, but they're not in all cases, so. Yet the police are going to see an upgrade in their equipment and an upgrade in their training to be able to -- to have heavier firepower.

Q What does that mean exactly?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: The other piece we have to --

Q I'm sorry -- go on.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: -- the other piece we have to continue to work on, though, is our intelligence, and this is where the police come in. They get intelligence from the people around them, and that will tell us where the Taliban -- and we've been pretty successful with this -- where the Taliban are massing. And we can maneuver in heavier police forces, which we call Afghan Civil Order Police (sic/Afghan National Civil Order

Police) or ANCOPs, and they're kind of like a first responder, heavy weapons SWAT team, if you will, which they'll be located throughout the country there to respond to police needs. So there's an operation that can get that immediate response, but also the army based on the intelligence preparation and successfully interdict the -- any anti-government forces prior to them being able to mass on the police.

But the whole key to that piece is getting the -- all of police districts fully operational and fully integrated with the community in the cop-walking-the-beat kind of sense, so that the community feels very safe and feels comfortable in talking to that policeman on a daily basis so that we can accumulate that data on a daily basis.

And in some areas it's working very successfully and we're able to get that information very rapidly because that policeman's there interacting with the community just like they do all over the world, and they pick up stuff before it gets too bad.

So it's really a two-part solution to the firepower capability of the Taliban or any insurgency. The first solution is, yes, the police -- or I guess really a three-part. The police will get heavier weapons and better training, and that's ongoing now. That bill was just approved in Congress about a month ago, so stuff is starting to flow in the country now. The second piece of that is the ANCOP response. And then the third piece is, as the police mission matures, we get better intelligence which then allows us to interdict the enemy, which then gets us better intelligence and it becomes a self-healing process.

Q

Okay. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

Q Yes. General, Andrew Lubin again from ON Point. Yesterday or the day before, Afghanistan, I guess announced would be the best word, they had yet one more record opium harvest. Are the APs and the VPs doing anything to -- are we still doing the burning campaigns or what are we doing to stop the growth and export of heroin, which I guess is still funding a lot of this?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Yeah. And the opium market is a very difficult issue. It is a primary crop for some hard-working Afghan farmers as well as, you know, an illegal trade for drug lords and other people. So there are several pieces that have to fit into place here. First off, there's the poppy eradication, and that is difficult, in the least, given the compartmentalized nature of Afghanistan that it's easy to hide the poppy growth. Also they've become much more efficient at growing poppy; although there may be less hectares of poppy grown, that there's more opium produced because they're becoming more efficient.

I think there are several keys. One is to attacking the drug lords and those people that support the poppy growth and providing economic viability of other crops for the

farmers. You can't just say, "Well, you can't grow the opium and therefore y'all can starve." We have to bring in some other type of crop, which State Department and Department of Agriculture are working through. But this is something that we certainly need to work on and give the farmers an alternative to what they're currently growing.

If we give them that alternative and then we rigorously work through the drug enforcement, I think we can start to get a handle on the opium on the opium trade, but if we just do one or the other, it will be very difficult.

Q Is there an alternative crop yet?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: There are some alternative crops, but they haven't been pushed as probably hard as we need to push them. So there's starting to be some growth of alternative crops, but just haven't gotten there yet.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. General Robert Livingston with us this morning for Bloggers Roundtable, and we've got just a few seconds, or a few minutes, here left, sir. Do you have any final thoughts or closing comments?

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Well, what I would say is, it takes three things for a government to really be successful. One is a method of selecting the government, and certainly we have that here. The second is a secure environment, and then the third is an economic environment.

We are well on our way to achieving the second piece of that, but we still need economic development from all countries. And Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan, are very industrious. They have -- they're survivors. They work hard at whatever they do, and there are many places within this country that are very stable. And that there is a workforce out there, 40 percent unemployment, that -- they're ready to go to work. And what we need throughout Afghanistan is a commitment for people to come in here and to utilize this great labor market and these great people.

So we're getting there. We're being very successful from the security standpoint. But we need to take that next step, though. We need to get that economic piece going.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for being with us this morning and this evening your time. Hopefully we can do this again here in another couple of weeks and kind of get some updates from you.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Okay, love to, and certainly appreciate you all taking the time, too.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

GEN. LIVINGSTON: Okay, have a good afternoon, and we'll take a good evening. Thank you. Goodbye.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thanks.

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